

Fly fishing perfect for pompano

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Fly fisherman Jerry Davis of Suntree took this six-fish limit of Florida pompano while wading along the west shore of the Indian River south of Palm Bay. He was with guide Gary Giles, of Palm Bay, who specializes in fly fishing and wade fishing.

In the past couple of weeks, fly fishermen Gary Giles and Jerry Davis have been hooking up with their limits of Florida pompano while wading in the Indian River south of Palm Bay.

“There’s definitely pompano to be caught,” said Giles, a licensed guide from Palm Bay who specializes in wade fishing. “You can plan on it. They’re not just an incidental catch, even with fly tackle. You just need to know what you’re looking for.” When you mention pompano, most anglers think of the ocean fish known for its delicious flavor that’s taken during the winter months along the surf.

But there are large numbers of the same pompano that move through inlets and into estuarine systems including the Indian River Lagoon in search of food

and their preferred mild water temperature of 78 to 79 degrees.

The river pompano is a bottom feeder that can be taken much the same way they are caught along the surf with tandem weighted bottom rigs offering sand fleas or cut clam. They’ll also strike small yellow-and-red-colored jigs like the Nylure Jig, for decades a favorite with pompano fishermen, bounced along the bottom. But catching these deep-

bodied gamesters with more strength than jack crevalle on fly fishing tackle is a fishing sport all its own.

“This is very special fishing to me,” said Davis, a retired California school superintendent who fly fished streams in the High Sierra for trout before trading his freshwater fly gear for saltwater systems when he moved to Suntree nine years ago.

“Anytime you can catch a quality fish like the pompano on fly, especially a fly you tied yourself, it’s an enjoyable experience.” Davis has been one of Giles’ regular clients for five years. They fly fish together regularly for other assorted species, including seatrout, snook and backwater tarpon.

Giles, a pro staff member for T.L. Johnson rods and Nautilus fly reels, reserves this time of the year for the river pompano.

“I target them every year starting in February and continuing through mid-April, when the females are getting ready to spawn,” said the 60-year-old Giles, who donates most of his guiding fees to the Hook Kids on Fishing program. “It’s a good time to release the larger ones, which are females.

I’ve taken them up to 21 and 22 inches.”

Like most river regulars, Giles, who doesn’t hesitate to share his fishing sites or fishing expertise, has pet spots, most of them conveniently close to his Palm Bay home. One is the Cape Malabar area south of Palm Bay, which features a bar extending into the river with adjoining dropoffs.

Actually, most any dropoff in the river north and south of Sebastian Inlet becomes a potential pompano spot. The Wabasso area produces, along with deeper water west of Sebastian Inlet.

It’s a matter of knowing the whereabouts of deeper water and then determining if pompano are there and that can be time consuming. Most of those areas must be fished from a boat.

“You’ll find dropoffs along the edges of bars, flats and even the spoil islands,” Giles explained. “Those become the better wading areas. You might be casting from knee-deep water into three to five feet of water. You’ll almost always increase your chances by wading because you go undetected.” Giles and Davis use a fly pattern designed by Giles called the Giles Clouser. It usually is tied on a No. 2 or No. 1 hook with weighted eyes and it has an overall yellow-orange appearance with a pink mid section and a white belly. Unlike most other fly patterns, the Clouser is tied in such a way that the barb of the hook rides up when retrieved. The Clouser style comes from famed fly fisherman Bob Clouser, who developed the first pattern of its type, the Clouser Minnow.

“The fly should be bounced along the bottom,” Giles explained. “Keep popping it with short strips and work it slow.” When they are not disturbed, pompano will hold in a small area for days.

For tackle, Giles and Davis use T.L. Johnson seven- and eight-weight fly rods, and occasionally a lighter six-weight.

Floating fly line matching the rod weight is recommended, along with a nine-foot monofilament leader graduating from 30-pound test to 15-pound test. The long leader allows the fly to reach the bottom. When expecting snook with their sharp gill plates, they’ll use 20-pound mono for the tippet. Davis landed a 29-inch snook recently.

Giles and Davis tie their own flies. In the past, the Giles Clouser was sold by fly tyer Stu Patterson of Palm Bay, who has decided to discontinue his professional tying. Unless another tyer produces the pattern, it will be up to fly fishermen to tie their own. Harry Goode’s still has a limited supply.

“It’s a great fly for a lot of different fish including the pompano,” Patterson said, “and it’s an easy pattern to tie.”

Tying the Giles Clouser

Recommended materials for the Giles Clouser start with golden-yellow and fire-orange Extra Select Craft Fur, a synthetic, for the orange appearance. The mid section is pink Krystal Flash followed by a white belly of Extra Select Craft Fur. Yellow 1/30th-ounce lead eyes provide the weight. Use red thread for the head on a No. 2 or No. 1 Mustad Signature Series hook.